Interview with Ted Hopkins
April 4, 2017
Interviewed at Wilkerson Funeral Home in Reidsville, North Carolina, by Sarah Bryan for Folklife of the Funeral Services Profession

Sarah Bryan: Okay, so we're recording. Let me ask you to introduce yourself again for the recording.

Ted Hopkins: Okay. My name is Ted Hopkins. I live in Reidsville, North Carolina, and I'm part of the Wilkerson Funeral Home. So, whatever—yeah.

SB: So you're from Rockingham County originally?

TH: Actually I am. I grew up in Eden, and my family's still in the same house I've always been. My parents are still with us, so that's a good thing. My dad's 90. And we went to school at Morehead High School over in Eden, then had opportunities beyond that, to go on to school at Chapel Hill. Then when I, as far as Chapel Hill goes, had a great time there, and met April after. And never dreamed I'd be in funeral service. I had a great career opportunity after school at Chapel Hill with Procter and Gamble, got great training and opportunity, and then made some career changes and was kind of bumping around, not really sure, and my father-in-law and I talked, and I thought, you know, maybe I can help him for a year, and try to get, help him get organized, get some things in place for the future, and then go and do something else. And that was in June of 1990, and I'm still here.

SB: Great. Now, what did you study at Chapel Hill?

TH: I did a double-major in Industrial Relations and Psychology. Industrial Relations is part of that business curriculum there.

SB: Can you tell me a bit about your early impressions of this field—I mean, before you yourself thought that you would be a part of it?

TH: Um, well, I think kind of the story of my past that impacted me most is when I was 16 my brother suicided. And it was an awful thing for our family. And we of course, when that happened, our family had always had relationships with Fair Funeral Home, and they took great care of my parents during that time. And of course I never thought about what they did. That just didn't cross my mind. I just knew it was an awful scenario for us, as a family. And in that experience, I had a, kind of had a spiritual encounter in the midst of all that, and realized that I just wanted to be a good boy for my parents, because my brother had some difficult times. And in light of that, it just kind of helped me to take some careful, conservative approaches to the way I was going to do life. So then I never really thought about funeral service. I just knew that was

awful. And so I went on to Chapel Hill, had the time of my life, was a cheerleader, as I told you. And so then a little bit later, as time would have it, I met this girl and her dad was in the funeral business. And I never considered funeral service. I just didn't think about it. It wasn't something that I pursued. I knew that we had a good experience when Tim died, but that's all I knew. So then when I met [April], and we decided to get married, I was exposed to that lifestyle, because that's what they lived in. And then when I was in this career-finding mode, I was trying to find my place—you know, we all kind of go through that, I think, at some point in our life—so when he needed—there were just some concerns about how to transition from the way things were done in the old days to the new days. And that transition still had not been made into the '80s and the early '90s. And so my father-in-law was desperate trying to figure out how to do that, and so I said, "Well, why don't I just come and help you work with your dad to help you come and do that?" And for whatever reason his dad trusted me. That was Pitt Wilkerson.

[00:05:15] And so my father-in-law trusted me, and his dad trusted me, and for whatever reason we all started communicating and working together. And we were able to kind of turn the tide, and turn the page, and start working towards the future. And as we did that, I realized, you know what? According to what my plans were I was just going to be here a short time, because I was not sure what I wanted to do with my life. And then after I landed here and I saw the relationship piece, and how valuable the work that we do is to the families that are suffering, I thought, "You know what? This could be ministry, this could be business opportunity, I'm a nice guy, that works in this business." And so after being in here for just a short while, I realized, "You know what? I think I'm going to go to school—" To manage a funeral home you have to have a funeral director's license. So I said—my father-in-law agreed—I said, "Let me just be me and be in the office, and be involved with the community, and do relationship and friendship. I can serve and wait on families, and you can kind of take care of the back room." Because that was his gift. He was really gifted with his hands, and did really beautiful work as far as the restoration and all the work in the back. And so he said, "Yeah, let's do it that way." And so then, in just a matter of months, his youngest daughter was also kind of in career-change mode, and she's really gifted, had a bright accounting mind, and I said, "We need her for the future." And she really was looking, and he said, "Let's do it." And so just a few minutes after I came here, Drew came in—and her name is Drew Wilkerson, now McGee—and so that just worked out. And we have so complemented each other over all these years. We are very different, but we have different gifts, which is beautiful; because she's gifted in the details, and I'm big-picture. I drive her crazy, because I'm always thinking of things that we should try, and she helps to reign me in so that we don't do something crazy. But then at the same time she can help us think through the numbers and the details. It's been a great team, as a family, to work together. So that's worked out really well. So I don't know if that answers your question or not.

SB: Yeah. Yeah. Very much. And that gets me to thinking about the ways that different people's personalities and interests can influence the history of a business.

TH: Absolutely. Yeah.

SB: Do you think, do you have a sense of how the founders, and the previous funeral directors, you know—how each one's personality may have shaped the business?

TH: Yeah, I think that, because of the history and the uncertainty, of not knowing Mr. William Henry[1] and Mr. Ross[2], I think they were—I think that they were probably brilliant, savvy men. To move to a place like Reidsville from Gaffney, South Carolina, and to draw a line in the sand and say, "We're going to start and run a legacy business," there had to be vision in that. And he came to work at a chance furniture store, or whatever, and just to have that kind of vision as remarkable. And so they put they put the cornerstone down and dug in, and they were all about relationship and friendship. And then when Mr. Pitt[3] came along, and his brother Mr. Robert[4]—probably mostly Mr. Pitt—his name was Pittman and everybody called him Mr. Pitt, that was his affectionate name. So I refer to him like that. When I first came here I was real careful to call him Mr. Wilkerson, because I wanted him to understand that he was the person of honor, and I wanted to honor him in that, and I didn't feel like I had the right to call him Mr. Pitt yet, at least.

[00:10:00] So pretty much always I called him Mr. Wilkerson. But he, the one thing—and we've talked about this forever in our staff meetings—Mr. Pitt was a friendly, genteel, gracious person. He carried that, that grace and compassion, that really was a game-changer. They were kind of the first funeral home in the county, so that, carrying that, was important. But for Mr. Wilkerson, Mr. Pitt, he was just all about generosity. He was so generous. And when times were hard, he would go out of his way to find a way, to make a way, for people to be taken care of. At his own expense. He didn't care about the money. He actually was concerned, and he didn't want people to think he made a lot of money. But he carried the profession with grace in such a way that said to the community, "He cares about us, and he's authentic. He's genuine, he's real." And so in our staff meetings today the one thing I'll say over—if I've said it once I've said a thousand, ten thousand, times, the one thing Mr. Pitt did was love people. And no matter what, at the end of the day, it has to be about relationship, and it has to be about sincere, authentic care. And if we're not doing that, and you can't be nice, don't come to work. I mean, that's just what it's got to be. And so the legacy of the funeral home here

---

[1] William Henry Wilkerson (died 1964), founder of Wilkerson Funeral Home

[2] Embalmer Marvin U. Ross, William Henry Wilkerson's business partner from the 1920s on

[3] Henry Pittman Wilkerson, William Henry Wilkerson's son

[4] Robert Reid "Bob" Wilkerson, William Henry Wilkerson's son

is friendliness, sincere, authentic care. And that was started at the beginning. So. Does that answer, help you?

SB: Yeah, very much. And I was going to ask—you very much just answered this—what you think the qualities are that makes a good funeral director.

TH: Yeah. Well, when I came—and I've said this before—but I'll never forget. Like just in a matter of the first few months that I was here, I said, "Listen"—and I realized I was going to be here, I was going to school, and I said to my father-in-law, "If you could put it in three things, what are the three things you would say is most important in funeral service?" And my father-in-law is kind of a jokester, and he didn't hesitate. He said, "Well, there are three things." He said, "It's service, service, and service." So, and he was kidding, but it just has to be all about the customer. And whatever their needs are, and as outrageous as it might be, and whatever the tragedy might be, the circumstances that you can't even dream of that might happen, we've got to carry grace into that and have something that the family says, "Man, we couldn't have done it without those guys." And that's just what it's got to be. So.

SB: How do you prepare yourself, or how do you take care of yourself emotionally, when you're in a field where you see so much grief, and so much tragedy?

TH: Yeah. Just because of my own history and my own situation at home with my family, I realized and knew that, I think, when I came here, they didn't really have a schedule. And I don't know how they did it. That was just kind of the way that funeral homes operated. They just said, "Well, that's what we do. We work day and night. We'll be there forever." And I said, to my father-in-law, I said, "Listen, we have to have"—and I call it mental health time—"we have to have some time away, or we're not—I can't do this if we don't." And so, I said, "Let's just try a schedule." And he said, "It'll never work." And so we started a—I don't remember exactly how we started it, but we started it so that at least every other weekend we were off.

[00:15:02] And so we had to have the team that we wouldn't lose anything by one person being off, and we had to have training and expectations and all of that. But when he realized he didn't have to be here, buddy, he was the first one at the door when his weekend was coming up. So we still do that. We have a ten-day/four-day rotation, so that we—that just protects our guys. And so the way we try to do it is, when you're off, when you come in that Monday you jump right into the front lines. So that we like for a director to start with a family and finish with that family. So when at the front endo f your ten days you jump right in, you kind of, you kind of—save the guys that have been working so hard over the weekend. And then they finish up three or four more days, and then you start waiting on the new calls, and then you can finish it up, and by the time your weekend is coming up that you work, they've been off, and they come back in and they take over for you. So the last three days of the ten days is

kind of the cleanup, finishing up. And the first seven days is when you're just right on the front lines, doing the work. So that's worked out really well. And so we try desperately to protect our staff, and to give people time to be away. Yeah. So. You've got to have that.

SB: And does the ten-day schedule sort of line up with the typical period in which you're serving a family?

TH: Yeah. Usually you start with a family, if something happened today, we would start with a family and it might take three to four days to compete that task. So if I waited on a family, like if I started on Monday, through the following Wednesday. So if I waited on a family on Sunday after the seven days, I would still have three days after that Sunday to finish the call. And it tends to work out, as far as, some guys are off Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and some guys are off Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, so that it doesn't—we don't have so many off all the time. So there's only two days every rotation that three or four people are off. So that works out pretty well.

SB: What is the typical progression of a call?

TH: Okay. If someone dies at the hospital, the first thing that would have to happen is the family would have to make the decision who they're going to trust to handle Mom or Dad or whoever. So the hospital would have that interchange with the family, "What funeral home do you want us to call?" And of course, that decision happens way before that, based on relationship and friendship and trust, and all the stuff that you do in the community that says, "We're the real deal, and you can trust us with your family." But anyway, when they make that decision, the call happens, the hospital or the facility would call the funeral home first, and say, "Mr. Jones passed away. Their family has requested your services." And then we interchange with them about some key facts that we've got to have, and when will he be released so that we can come to pick him up. And so then we, regardless of the time day or night, we go to pick up the body. And we have guys that do that for us in the nighttime, and we all do that, as far as the directors are concerned, during the day. So whenever that call comes we get busy. And then there's a director that would be on call on that particular day, and that director would then make contact with the family as soon as it's appropriate; like if it's at three o'clock in the morning, we don't call them at three in the morning, but we call them right away after usually about 8:30 the next morning, so that they're not anxious and wondering, "Okay, what do I do next?" So we try to call them in a timely manner. If it's during the day, we try to call them as soon as we get the call, so that they know we're on it, we're making arrangements to go get Mr. Jones, and that we want you to know that we are here for you. And so then we would talk to the family about kind of some of the things that we need to start thinking about. Then you have a to-do list—and I'll give you a copy of the to-do list—the things that we would give to a family, and say, these are the things that we have to have for the formal paperwork like the death

certificate, and then these are the things that might help you as we start designing an obituary and making plans. And we ask them about cemetery property, and if they've even thought that far ahead, or what are their plans?

[00:20:05] And they might say, "Oh, we don't have cemetery property, as a matter of fact we want Mom to be cremated." And we'll coach them through, what does that mean, what does that look like? Because the one thing that we have to do is to dispose of the body. So whether it's cremation, earth burial, whatever the family chooses, that's got to happen. So then part of our job is to make sure they understand, "How do you want to honor and memorialize your mom, or your dad?" And then we would then begin to coach them and talk them through their options. Even if the body's going to be cremated and that's how the disposition's going to happen, they can still have Mom prepared, they can have a traditional visitation and funeral service, and the cremation can happen after. We, you know, we were kind of slow on the cremation thing, but we were the first funeral home in Rockingham County to put in a crematory. I didn't show you the crematory, but we have a crematory on-site here. And so that's one piece of the equation that has been a very positive thing. The person never leaves our care. Before we had the crematory, we had to farm that out. We would send the body to Greensboro or whatever. Usually, we had a great, long-relationship with Guilford Cremation Service and we trusted them, and they took care of our families and the people that we had to have the bodies cremated for. And they provided that service; we took care of the families, but they provided that service for us. So when we put our crematory in about six years ago, it really became imperative that we have our own crematory, because that piece of the equation continues to expand. Families are saying, "Yep, we want to use that as our means of disposition." And so now we can take care of all of that right here. So then after we kind of talk through what the plans are going to look like, then we help them through making decisions like what type of casket they want to use, and what kind of outer burial container, and based on the cemetery, the requirements of the cemetery, we would coach them how to do that. We, you know, it still is a profit business, so we have to talk to the families about how they're going to handle the finances. And so we, if they have insurance we'll help them process all the paperwork, and if they have, or if they want to just pay for the funeral or however that part has to happen, we have to have that conversation. As difficult as you would think that is, you know—it's delicate. Because we're really careful. We don't want them to feel that that's all that matters to us. Because there's really no amount of money that's worth what we do. And I think that it's still, a lot of times folks don't really understand what has to be done. They think we have a funeral and a visitation and drive nice cars. And the details and the, you know, facilities like we have, and all the things that we have to do, and you can see the landscaping—all that we try to do to make this place a beacon of hope, in order to do that, it takes resources. And so we're careful to be fair, we're careful to keep our prices in order, but we do have to charge for those services that we render. And most of the people that come into funeral service are nice, kind, gracious people. And it's hard for them to have to say, "How are you going to pay for it?" When I came

in, I just wanted to give everything away, and Mr. Wilkerson lived that way, and he really gave more than he should have. And it wasn't—and it's not that we don't want to be generous anymore, it's just that people expect qualified, quality people, and we have to pay them every two weeks. And they want beautiful stuff, and they want nice cars, and they want a beautiful chapel, and they want to be able to stream funerals. And all that stuff requires resources. And so we try to communicate it in such a way that, you know, if we're sincere, and we love people—which, that's what we talk about all the time—and if we're about relationship, then people, the money becomes less of a concern.

[00:25:15] And people want to be safe. They want to know they can trust us. And we have to prove that. We have to prove that over and over and over. We can't decide we're going to take advantage of one family this day, and the next family we're not. It has to be consistent. And you know, this is kind of tongue-in-cheek, but we say, "It's got to be the Wilkerson way, and that means the same thing every time." Of course, every circumstance is different. Every family is different. The culture of every family is different. And we've got to read that, but at the end of the day, it's still got to be the Wilkerson way, and it's got to be sincere.

SB: How do your—if it's all right for me to ask about this—how do your personal spiritual beliefs and callings enter into your work?

TM: Hm. Hm. That's a big question. For me, if you're just talking about me, it is, it really is the driving force that keeps me coming back here. One of the subtle things that I say to our staff, and I think they have all embraced, is that we speak life here. I know that sounds kind of quirky for a funeral home, but when death is in the equation, and when hopelessness comes to the front door, somehow, some way, they've got to see hope. And the fullness of hope and life comes from my personal journey with faith. And so, and really, I think all of our staff, from the beginning I make it very clear that that's who we are, and if that's offensive to you and you don't want that to be in the equation, then you don't need to work here. Because that faith is that when you're in a situation like we are with families every day, what they are experiencing right now is the hurt and all that comes with loss. Somehow, some way, by the time we start and finish with them, after the funeral, our hope and our prayer is that the family says, "You know what? We're going to make it. We do have hope. There is life beyond the death." And we don't preach. We don't wear it on our sleeve. But I do think that sincere kindness that we carry is recognizable, and I think people—people all in our community do see us as a business of faith. And I'm okay with that, because that means that there's, that there's more to the equation than just getting a funeral done. And I study the scriptures a lot, and just try to carry that as just my personal journey, but I would just say, you know, one of the scriptures I love is "the kindness of God that leads to repentance," and repentance is not really our goal—kindness leads to a lot of things. Kindness leads to care. Kindness leads to hope. Kindness leads to just a smile. I mean,

you open a door for Grandma and help her get out of the car, and hold the door for her. Kindness goes deep. And if you're friendly and nice and you smile, and you welcome people, that just goes deep. And so kindness is a deep part of that. I think I need to tell you this. One of the things we've been working on lately I sour core values, and we've just, as a team, we just, as a staff agreed on our core values. And I will give you our core values, our top-five core values.

[00:30:00] Trust, family, integrity, compassion, and teamwork. And trust was number one. And they did that, I didn't. I gave them a list of a hundred. We worked on it for about six months, and I'm just getting ready to do a, some of our printed materials and things are going to be utilizing this. Every staff meeting we'll be wrapping around, "We don't have core values just because. We have core values because that's what we believe." And if you believe that, then we expect you to act that way. Trust is one thing, when you're giving it, for somebody to trust you. Trust is another thing when someone else is acting towards you, for you to give trust to them. So it goes two ways. And so what we're trying to teach and understand as a team is that these core values are double-sided. What does integrity mean to you, and how do you receive integrity from me? And it's interesting how faith was next. It was number six. And honesty was in there next. So I think that all of the staff, from the guy that only works at night and helps pick up bodies for us, to the guy that puts up tents for us, everybody on the team was a part of this process. And it was beautiful. It was really neat. We had some great interchange as a team. And so they all bought in. Actually, they don't even know what the top five are yet. So the next staff meeting, we'll do that. So I think, just to answer your question about how does faith and kind of our religious journey come into play, I think everybody sees it as an integral piece of the equation, as far as how we carry the strength that we have to carry. You know, sometimes, I might be waiting on three or four families at once. And it's heavy. There have been times that I've just wanted to come in here and crawl up in the corner and just weep, and just say, "I can't do this." And then there are those times where these dear and precious friends of yours that call you, and you know, "This is why I do this," and I wouldn't want anybody else helping them. Because they love me and I love them, and they're counting on me to carry them through. And then there are those times when those very dear and precious friends, something happens, and you're not here. And that's awful, because you want to be here. But then you still have to guard your family time and your life, and you have to trust the staff that's here to carry it. And so we have to have the same mantra, we have to have the same awareness of who we are, what we do, and why we do it. So we work hard at that. So that everybody carries the same culture. You know, we're working on culture. And that's kind of the new buzzword in business, but--. I'm sure you've heard of Simon Sinek, *The Why*. You've got to know why you do it, and if you don't, you can't really give it to families in a way that really answers the solution. So I hope that wasn't too much of an answer.

SB: No, not at all ,this is fantastic. Now, you've bene in the profession for—you said since 1990? How have you seen the public's attitudes about grief, about traditions having to do with funerals, how have you seen those change over the last years?

TH: Well, I think our culture is more about convenience, and that's just the way everything is going. And the pace of life, the—I think convenience is kind of—how do I say this? I think convenience kind of tricks people into saying, "I just want it to be convenient," and then they lose sight of the relationship that's in the equation. And then months later—and they're hurting and they don't know why.

[00:35:02] Because they didn't memorialize Mom. This is kind of the other saying that we say. There has to be a final hello before you say goodbye. And that part of the equation is that last viewing, that final time with that person. Part of it is seeing them fixed and restored, and in a good place. But part of it is just being able to say one more time, "I love you, Dad. Now I can say goodbye." And we say that to families. We've seen the value and the power of—over, and over, and over—of families that come to us at first and say, "We don't want to see Mom again." Then we talk about, what about the grandchildren, or what about the sister that's been at the beach and she hasn't had a chance to see her? You know, we've witnessed the power of being able to have that last hello. So that in itself is a, has become a real important thing. What was the question again? I got off track.

SB: About changing—

TH: About changing. And I was just saying that— So that, the convenience thing, and the fact that people perceive that's really all that matters, we have to hopefully coach them to not miss what they could miss. The other thing is technology, as far as change goes. With social media and all that, we've had to get involved with that. And web presence, all that stuff. And I know you're not necessarily talking about change, but all of that has changed the perception of the consumer. The cremation thing has, continues to grow. And part of that cremation is a part of the misunderstanding; they think, "If I'm going to cremate Mom, we can't see her again." So we have to coach them to say, "Yes, you can. You can see them again." And the perception of finances—and no matter how you shake it you are going to spend less money if you got the cremation route—but that in itself has changed the traditional funeral director, as far as his business goes, because he's got to still find ways to keep the lights on. Because the families still need us. Whether they cremate the body or whether they bury the body. So we have to be savvy in a way that allows us to still provide that quality service for the disposition of the body and the presentation of the body to the family and the public, and all of that, and still maintain the resources coming in so that we can provide these things that people like, that they want. So just that whole idea of being able to understand how to still make a profit, with the changing decisions that the public tends to make, whether it being going cremation or green burial or whatever. I mean, how do we still servce these

families and still have enough revenue to provide the quality of care and service that we provide? So those are some of the biggest things that have really caused the change in the public. I just think culture in general, people are moving around, and they need it to be convenient because Billy's in Florida and Sally's in Texas and Johnny's in Maine, Mom and Dad are here. So they have to come back. And you know, generations make a difference. The more traditional generation is that group above 65. And they still want earth burial—a lot. But now all of a sudden we might see one grandma who buried her husband, and she's been talking to her kids and saying, "Look, just cremate me, put my ashes with my husband." So it's just—and that's okay. But still, it's just changing. I think another big change that's happening is people want to have a party. So a lot of funeral homes are moving in the direction of events, and having event centers, and having a way for people to cater food and have a party.

[00:40:06] So that's becoming a part of the equation, and it's going to become more so.

SB: How does—in terms of all these changes going on, how does Reidsville compare, do you think, to, say, Greensboro or Durham.

TH: Well, we're still more traditional here. We just are. But, you know, it's starting to—that whole awareness, and we have a lot of brilliant, forward-thinking people here. We're just not all backwoods and small-town bumpkins and that sort of thing. And one thing that we've tried to do here is we've tried to stay as current as any funeral home anywhere. Considering our website, our web presence, we're very Facebook-connected. All of that social media change is part of what we do. Just streaming funerals. Those are things that we offer. We can help people figure out how to have a party. We have done that several times, and just because we have a traditional funeral home doesn't mean we can't do that stuff. And we've been very intentional, to keep our staff thinking forward, thinking current, and thinking beyond what we kind of live in. So we're proud and pleased that we can do anything that anybody can do anywhere. But at the same time, we're still very traditional in the expectations of our community.

SB: And how has the community itself changed? You said you're from Eden, right?

TH: I am.

SB: And so that gets me thinking about the textile industry.

TH: And we've lost a lot of—a lot of people might even say Reidsville and Eden are dying. Yeah. And that being said, you know, we have another—it's interesting, funeral service is still a segregated business. The African American community serves its own, and the white community serves its own. There's some crossover; we've served some African American families here, and we love that opportunity when it comes our way. I

know that some of the African American firms have served some white families—I know that happens. And we have another family funeral home, white funeral home, here, that works hard, and they have a nice business. So it's interesting, their founder worked for the Wilkersons years ago, and they kind of wanted to do their own thing, and they've done very well. And so I think that just the whole idea of the community and—I lost my train of thought again—the question was? Help me.

SB: About changing community.

TH: Yeah, the changing community, yes. And so we were, you know, we were big-time American Tobacco here, and Cone Mills was here, and then in Eden, you know, Miller just went out again. That was a big plant over there. And they were Fieldcrest for years, textiles. Some of those big businesses are gone. And so there's a real intentional effort, with county government and city governments, to work together, to try to attract—it's a beautiful county, we've got a lot of beautiful natural resources. We have, you know, the lake in the western part of the county, we have rivers over towards Eden, the Dan and the Smith Rivers. They've done a good job of using those resources. We have Lake Reidsville here. A lot of fishing happens. But I think that the communities, some of those losses have hurt us. American Tobacco was—you know, there was labor running the lines, and people making really good money. Those jobs are gone now. So the labor jobs are not as well-paid, and so a lot of people have to go to Greensboro, or they go to Alamance County, or whatever. So we're just always trying to be a part of whatever we can do to make the economy thrive. But it has been difficult. And I know that our future is dependent on us being out of the box, and considering how do we expand beyond just the lines of our community.

[00:45:20] And we haven't really figured out how that's going to happen. But it's something that we have to think about. You have to grow if you're going to thrive, and so we have to really figure out how we're going to do that.

SB: What about other populations in the area? Is there much of a Hispanic population here?

TH: There is. It continues to grow. And I, ironically my wife is an English as a Second Language teacher, so she's very much connected to the Hispanic community. But as far as other communities and other ethnic groups, really the Hispanic community is the one that has expanded and continues to expand more and more. How do we serve those communities? And we've had some opportunities—under duress, under awful circumstances, to serve some of those families. So we try to do all we can, and get help from people that can speak Spanish to do that. That's going to be part of our future, we think.

SB: What has that been like? What cultural differences have you had to navigate?

TH: Well, I think the hardest part is they like to, if someone's here, they want to go home. And so the international shipping is quite now—it's always been cumbersome, but more so now than ever. I mean, all the paperwork and every form that's got to be done, it's got to go through the Mexican Consulate. All the international rules, certain requirements to get the body to Mexico City, or Guatemala, or wherever it's going to go. So all of that is a very delicate thing. And a lot of paperwork And so, and then it's fragile to communicate properly to the family if they can't speak English. So we try to make sure that we have someone that can help us get that done, so that we don't miss anything, and the family feels honored, and still feels that care that we give people that we can communicate with regularly. So it's tricky.

SB: Yeah. Is there somebody on staff who speaks Spanish?

TH: No, we have friends that we can call in that can jump right in and help us out. And oftentimes the family will have bilingual capacity—people in the family or friends that they'll call in. It's still just delicate. We want it to be right, and we try to do the best we can.

SB: And in this immigration climate—

TH: Right. It's tricky.

SB: There must be a lot of things to keep in mind that aren't talked about.

TH: Mm-hm. Mm-hm.

SB: Interesting. And what about different religious practices?

TH: Not a whole lot of—most people are faith-based, traditional Protestant. We have a Catholic church here, and they have some different beliefs, but still the process is the same, and we just work very carefully with the priest. We just let him tell us what to do, and we honor him, and do what they want. And we serve a few Hindu families, which has kind of really been neat for us. We provide the facilities, and they have a very rigorous process that they like to have, and we have the crematory here, and they like to be hands-on all the way to the retort, and they put the body in the crematory. The next of kin, you know, hits the closing of the door. It's quite the—been on the learning curve for us. We've served a few of those families, and have made friendships with a couple fo Indian families here that trust us. And so that's been really interesting for us. And so when they have a funeral, it's interesting how the Patel family is all over the East Coast, and one funeral we had not long ago, they came from all over. From Florida, New York, and whatever. And the men are on one side, the women are on one side. They have

their traditional service, and it takes a few hours. It works. So. But that, it's mostly Protestant services here.

SB: What are some calls over the course of your career that have stayed with you, for one reason or another—either because they were special and good, because they were special and sad?

[00:50:05] TH: I think that there are so many that I could talk about. I think the most impactful thing for me is just the thought of relationship and the friends that I have, and the people that trust me personally and our staff, and the deep, deep friendships that so many of our guys have with people, and families that are not in their family. And there are calls that you never forget. And they're—I'll just tell you a couple. There was a family that had a young man that was, had a brain tumor, and they were trying to get a handle on all that. We were in church with them. And we're really close, our kids played with their kids. And things started going awry, and it was Election Day of I can't remember the year. But anyway, they discovered that he had a brain tumor. And emergency surgery, he had survived, and over the next eight months, the tumor would multiply. And so, and it became awful. He was seven. So we—they talked to me, and knew that his situation was progressing. And we were getting ready to on vacation, and we knew it was really close. And I said, "Look, you call me. Whatever." And he was at home. They had hospice in the equation. And so when they, when he died, um, the mom and dad were so precious—and this story is in my book, you'll be able to find more about it there.[5] But I'll just give you the highlights. This was the piece of the equation that was just such an honor for me. I told the dad, I said, "Look, you don't have to— You call me, I'll get home as quick as I can, you don't have to wait for me. Our guys will come to the house and get Josh." And he said, "No. It doesn't matter how long it takes. We love Josh. We want you to come to the house." So he died about 2:00 in the morning. It was about day four or five in our vacation. We were at White Lake down towards the beach. He died about 2:00, and they waited 'til four to call me. And I said, "When did this happen?" And they said, "Oh, he died a few hours ago. We just didn't want to wake you up. We wanted you to get some sleep before you come." And of course it was a three-hour drive. And they said, "We're good, we want you to come." So I packed up and came on back, and got one of my guys to help me. And so I went to the house, and of course they were a family of faith, strong, deep, abiding faith, and they knew that, and felt trust, that I would take care of him, and they were okay to let me take him out of their home. And so he was upstairs, and so I just cradled him, and then carried him down the steps. And we brought him home. Just for a mom and dad to have that kind of trust, to say, "You can take my son." That was—never forget that. Another great story I'll never forget, this little grandma— I sing, and I was singing at a funeral, and we were at her church, and she was just a saint. She was one of those, she

---

[5] *Life Stories: Healing and Hope in the Wake of Loss*, by Ted Hopkins. 2009, Higherlife Publishing, Orlando.

walked in the room, it's like the presence of God was in the room. She just carried that special—she was just a saint. And I sang at a service, and I sang "It Is Well" at the funeral. And after the funeral she came up and put her arm around me, she said, "That's it." I said, "What's it?" She said, "That's the song you're going to sing at my funeral." Anyway, every time I would see her, it was like 15, 16 years later, but every time I would see her throughout that period of time, she would put her arm around me and say, "You know what song it is, don't you?" I said, "Yes, ma'am." And so she just loved me, and we had just a precious friendship.

[00:55:05] And so we died, and I had to go to the home to pick her up. And she was in a really, she was in a little bedroom and the halls were all crooked and—whatever, and there was no way we could get the stretcher in there. The house was full of people. And her daughter's a precious friend, and she knew the friendship I had with her mom.

[End of recording]